



Associazione Astrofili Spezzini

Luigi Sannino, AAS President

The BAA-affiliated Associazione Astrofili Spezzini (AAS) was founded in 1978 by a group of students from La Spezia, Italy, who shared a dream: to build an astronomical observatory on the hills overlooking the Golfo dei Poeti (Gulf of Poets). This dream came true in 1989 with the construction of the Monte Viseggi Astronomical Observatory, officially inaugurated by the renowned astrophysicist Margherita Hack.

The observatory was built on the ruins of a former anti-aircraft battery constructed in 1936 by the Royal Italian Army. During World War II, it was captured and later destroyed by German forces. Today, this historic site hosts both scientific research and cultural heritage, where the memory of the past meets a vision for the future.

In 2022, after a long closure following mismanagement in 2007, the association was revitalised with a fresh, inclusive and community-oriented mission. This new vision led to the full restoration of the observatory and the rebirth of the AAS as a regional hub for outreach and scientific exploration.

Today, the AAS is a vibrant community of more than 130 active members. It meets twice a month at its main headquarters in downtown La Spezia, which houses an auditorium, administrative offices and the nationally recognised ‘Camille Flammarion’ astronomy library.

Meetings are held in person and include public lectures, updates on research activities and preparations for outreach events. New members are always welcome, with training

Figure 1. The entire operating team at the observatory.



available for both beginners and experienced amateur astronomers.

The association organises a wide range of activities, from public observation nights (Figures 2 & 3) and solar outreach events to educational workshops (Figure 4) and theoretical courses. Members also take part in field trips, skywatching events, and scientific collaborations with local schools (Figure 5) and universities. The AAS is actively involved in follow-up campaigns for near-Earth objects and plays a critical role in promoting scientific curiosity among children and adults alike. The group regularly collaborates with educators to bring astronomy directly into classrooms – both during the day and at night.

Recent and upcoming highlights include the inauguration of Italy’s third ionospheric observatory, built in partnership with the Istituto Nazionale di Geofisica e Vulcanologia. This new ionosonde will be used both for science and public education, and represents the only international-level collaboration for such an instrument in Italy. The association has also relaunched the Monte Viseggi Science Park (Figure 6), which now hosts several specialised facilities: the Parco del Sole (Sun Park), with solar telescopes and a hand-built heliograph; the Osservatorio Fiammetta (Fiammetta Observatory), dedicated to exoplanet research; the Osservatorio Cassini (Cassini Observatory), home to the province’s largest public



Figure 2. Interior of the Osservatorio Luciano Zannoni (MPC126) during a public event.

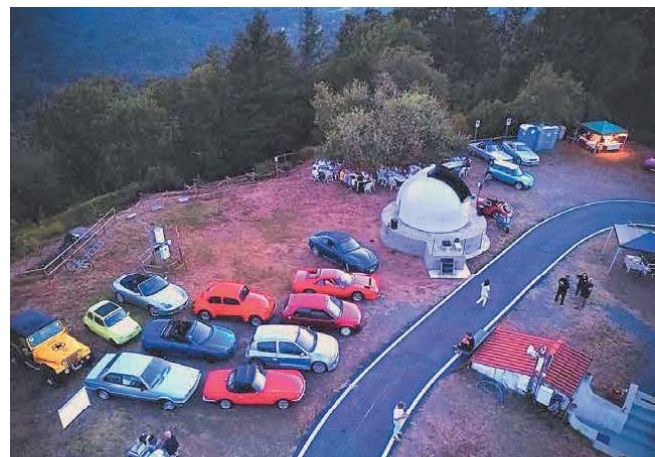


Figure 3. Aerial view of the Monte Viseggi Science Park during an evening event with the Circolo Auto e Moto Storiche La Spezia (La Spezia Historic Car and Motorcycle Club).



telescope – a Newton 510 $f/3.5$ with precision Giacometti optics; and the Osservatorio Luciano Zannoni (Luciano Zannoni Observatory), which houses a 410-mm Ritchey–Chrétien telescope, also equipped with Giacometti optics. The latter is dedicated to asteroid follow-up observations and holds the prestigious Minor Planet Center (MPC) code 126.

From the Osservatorio Luciano Zannoni, the AAS has discovered six main-belt asteroids. Notably, Luigi Sannino, the association's current president, is credited with discovering three asteroids, including (117155) Palmaria. He holds the Guinness World Record as the youngest person ever to discover an asteroid – an achievement sparked by his early fascination with Comet Hale-Bopp, discovered by Alan Hale, who is now an honorary member of the Astrofili Spezzini.

In recent years, the AAS has embraced a strong commitment to inclusion and accessibility, particularly at the Monte Viseggi Science Park. While the main dome of the observatory remains inaccessible to visitors with mobility impairments due to its narrow historic entrance, the facility has been equipped with a 3-D virtual viewing system that allows all guests to explore the telescope's structure and follow live observations on a dedicated monitor.

Special attention is also given to visually impaired visitors: the site features Braille panels, tactile 3-D models – kindly provided by the local company Superfici Srl – as well as audio guides and a unique sound system that broadcasts real-time meteor detections as they enter Earth's atmosphere. These tools are designed not just to inform but to spark the imagination and offer a multisensory experience of the Universe.

The management and research team (Figure 1) at Monte Viseggi consists of dedicated members who oversee operations, conduct scientific observations, and deliver outreach programmes. This team includes Alfonso Mancuso (asteroid follow-up, researcher at observatory MPC126), Roberto Cioni (observatory director, science communicator), Giampietro Cattoi (science communicator), Giovanni Parente (science communicator), Claudio Gentile (exoplanet research, science communicator), Stefano Benaglia (treasurer, science communicator), Simona Mercanti (event organiser, science communicator), Noemi Manzo (event organiser,



Figure 4. 'Night of the Shooting Stars' featuring a talk by Dr Sabrina Mugnos.

science communicator), Luca Bertagna (asteroid follow-up), Sirio Negri (asteroid follow-up, science communicator), Ingrid Roncarolo (science communicator), Francesco Lipillini (science communicator) and Luigi Sannino (president, asteroid follow-up and researcher at observatory MPC126).

Their combined efforts ensure that Monte Viseggi remains an active, professional-grade astronomical site dedicated to both scientific advancement and public engagement.

Among the AAS's distinguished members are Sabrina Mugnos, a geologist, volcanologist, and popular science author of more than 15 books on topics including the Universe, geology and astrobiology; Claudio Cosci, an informal educator affiliated with the NASA science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programme; and Dr Silvia Beghi, employee of D-Orbit who performs presentations together with Claudio on the activities in space. Through the NASA STEM Gateway and NASA Connecting Our Network of NASA Educators for Collaborating Together in STEM (CONNECT)

platforms, Cosci has access to a wide range of educational resources and interactive content designed to connect students and the public with real-world applications of STEM in NASA missions. He also participates in training activities and has access to the NASA Speakers Bureau, enabling the association to invite NASA experts to online educational events. Their involvement adds great depth and interdisciplinary perspective to the society's activities.

The AAS publishes its own quarterly magazine, *ASTRONOMICA*, written entirely by its members. The publication covers a wide range of topics, from astronomical observations and scientific history to personal essays and the association's latest news. Distributed in both digital and printed formats, *ASTRONOMICA* is a central tool for the association's outreach mission.

Adding cultural depth to the Science Park, Monte Viseggi also hosts a small museum of anti-aircraft artillery that pays tribute to the site's wartime history. Highlights of the collection include an original Marconi Marine radio, donated by the La Spezia section of the Associazione Radioamatori Italiani, and an Ansaldo 90/53 howitzer from 1942 – the same model once installed at the battery – on loan from the Associazione Museo della Melara, which preserves the legacy of the renowned OTO Melara defence company. The museum also showcases artefacts uncovered during the 2022 restoration works, reinforcing the connection between history, science and education. 📖



Figure 5. Schoolchildren from Albiano Magra participating in the Lunar Project, promoted by the Union of Italian Amateur Astronomers.



Figure 6. Aerial view of the Monte Viseggi Science Park.

'Society Profile' is a series in which we highlight astronomical societies affiliated with the BAA. If you would like your society profiled, contact editor@britastro.org.